

# Community Appearance

*Community appearance-related issues are of fundamental importance. Improving the City's appearance is essential if the City is to maintain its unique identity within the region.*

Community pride is projected through the development and maintenance of a distinctive, attractive image. This section of the plan has been developed to enhance the positive visual aspects of the built and natural environment and promote substantial improvements to the appearance of the City's entryways, business corridors, and neighborhoods.

Post-World War II development in the City occurred in a manner typical of many suburban communities. As a result, much of the commercial development in the City emphasized highway visibility and automobile access, with little attention afforded to pedestrians. The City's commercial "strips" are therefore characterized by aging commercial structures, vast parking lots, inadequate landscaping, obtrusive signage, utility poles with overhead wires and an overall state of visual confusion.

In contrast, the City's Historic Downtown area has retained some of its order and character that distinguishes it from the City's other commercial areas. The combination of the streetscape, building massing, brick sidewalks and overall scale in the historic downtown have resulted in an attractive, unique appearance.

The system of floodplain land that runs through the City provides natural open space that has a generally positive effect on the City's appearance. Floodplain land in the City is protected from development by its designation as Open Space Preservation in this plan, and by zoning mechanisms restricting its use. The Chesapeake Bay Preservation area regulations also restrict uses in certain environmentally sensitive areas.

In addition to floodplain and Chesapeake Bay preservation areas, the City also has a significant amount of open space in the form of parks and public sites including school grounds. Many of these spaces provide visual relief and buffering from developed areas.

One of the most appealing features of the City is the appearance of some of its residential neighborhoods. Many

of the older neighborhoods contain large shade trees that provide natural canopy, helping to conceal overhead wires. Houses in the City are typically well maintained, and home improvement programs are made available for homeowners needing assistance. Programs also exist that are designed to help homeowners modernize the interiors and exteriors of the houses, helping keep houses visually attractive, both inside and out. In addition, the City emphasizes the maintenance of neighborhood streets and sidewalks to improve pedestrian connectivity and ease of use in its yearly Capital Improvements Program process. These factors combine to enhance the desirability of the City's neighborhoods.

Considered together, these factors compose much of the physical environment of the City of Fairfax and have a profound impact upon how the City is perceived by visitors and residents alike. The presence of a coherent pattern of physical development and the availability of well-conceived and appropriately maintained public spaces and open spaces are outward indications of community involvement and civic pride.



Sherwood Community Center Plaza

## Community Appearance Opportunities

Enhanced community appearance can best be achieved through a process taking into account government efforts, community values and private development activities. A well-defined process is necessary to bring improved design quality, order and legibility to the City's appearance. In 1994, the City adopted a Community Appearance Plan that provided a vision to direct public and private improvements within the City of Fairfax.

The Community Appearance Plan (CAP) emphasizes improving the City's appearance by applying aesthetic guidelines and improved landscape standards to public and private development. In addition, architectural and site design details such as lighting and public and commercial signage are discussed. Landscape planting, signage, site details and architecture are evaluated with regard for traditional townscape principles. The Historic District Guidelines, adopted in 1993 to ensure that infill development, redevelopment, landscaping and signage in Old Town Fairfax will be compatible with its existing character, are an appendix to the CAP.

The Old Town Fairfax component of the CAP presents broad recommendations for the improvement of the City's Historic Downtown and Transition Area. A particular emphasis of that component is the enhancement of the pedestrian environment. Through the use of text and graphics, recommendations are made for street frontage improvements, improved visual clarity, enhanced pedestrian circulation and the development of open space areas. Figure CA-1 illustrates measures that improve the context of the streetscape by use of plant materials and hardscaping. The CAP recommends the placement of utilities underground, a major capital improvement, to provide greater visual clarity to the downtown as illustrated in Figure CA-2. The undergrounding of utilities has been an ongoing project in Old Town since 2006.

The Corridors component of the CAP recommends a program of improvements concurrent with planned road widening, redevelopment and new development projects. By programming extensive planting of various species trees as well as installation of planted center medians, decorative light fixtures and interesting site details, the Community Appearance Plan seeks to spur the transformation of the City's corridors. The Fairfax Boulevard Master Plan addresses many of the concerns noted in the Corridors component regarding the Fairfax Boulevard corridor and its intersection with Chain Bridge Road in particular.

Figure CA-1  
**Streetscape Measures**

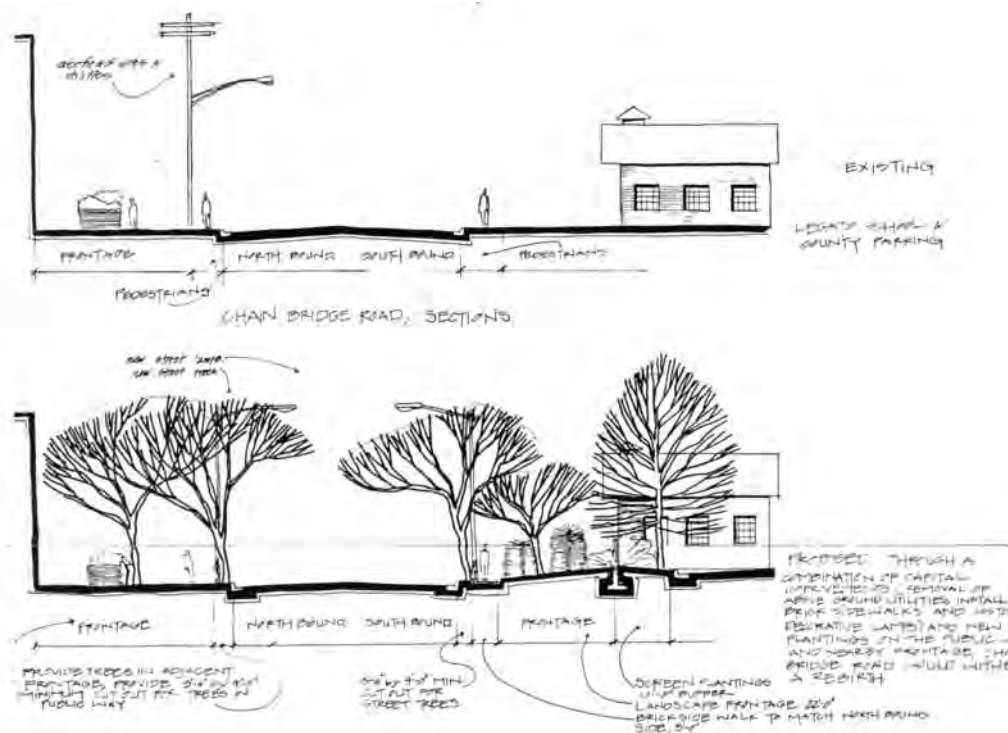


Figure CA-2  
**Underground Utilities**



Before utility lines were placed underground



After utility lines were placed underground



The implementation and maintenance of these design components will require extensive public investment. The City has been successful implementing features such as public landscape planting using native plants, brick walkway construction, and the development and enhancement of parks and open spaces by programming expenditures through the Capital Improvements Programming process. The placement of utilities underground has proven a particularly difficult task for the City, but has met with moderate success. Completion of these projects will require a commitment by the City, along with the assistance of the developers of adjacent properties that receive benefit from the project. Where appropriate, that funding may be supplemented with available state or federal resources and private sector participation.

To further advance the implementation of these recommendations, a creative public-private partnership should be nurtured. For example, the appropriate maintenance of private parcels and contributing actions by developers can greatly enhance the overall community appearance. These efforts should continue to be encouraged through vehicles such as beautification competitions, proffered development plans, and cooperative efforts between City staff and neighborhood organizations. In this way, demand on municipal budgets can be lessened, diffusing the responsibility for aesthetics throughout the community.

## Community Appearance Efforts

In addition to directly funding public landscape planting and other beautification projects, the City is also involved in the following community appearance-related programs:

- Working with civic associations to acquire and plant street trees in residential areas;
- Designating a City clean-up month and day to encourage groups to remove litter from the City's most visible locations;
- Providing litter control and recycling literature to encourage citizen participation in those efforts;
- Developing and enforcing regulations to rid the City's neighborhoods of junk vehicles;
- Obtaining grants for extensive tree-planting efforts throughout the City;
- Implementing the Chain Bridge Road underground utility project;



Old Town Village

- Continued support of the Adopt-A-Spot volunteer maintenance and clean-up program and seasonal community clean-up campaigns;
- Providing weekend loans of City trucks for residents to remove yard and home debris from private clean-up efforts;
- Funding improvements to City-owned properties;
- Seeking developer commitments of quality architecture, landscape planting, lighting and signage during the redevelopment, rezoning and special use permitting process;
- Awarding residential and commercial Community Appearance Awards to recognize outstanding improvements and developments;
- Supporting the Fairfax Renaissance Housing Corporation that oversees the Neighborhood Renaissance program, which is designed to facilitate the home renovation process for residents to modernize and improve the appearance of the City's aging housing stock; and

- Providing grants for civic association efforts aimed at improving neighborhood appearance.

The City's Zoning Ordinance also supports improving the City's appearance. The most significant of these provisions are summarized below:

- The parking regulations require additional landscape plantings to break up large expanses of paving and to provide screening from the street.
- Single-family residential zoning codes place a limit on the percentage of residential front yards that can be paved for parking purposes.
- The commercial and residential district regulations incorporate minimum landscaped open space requirements.
- The sign regulations allow smaller and fewer commercial signs and encourage better design.
- The site plan regulations require improved screening and landscaping between different land uses and along street frontages.



Main Street Marketplace

- The floodplain regulations control the nature and extent of development in environmentally sensitive areas. The Chesapeake Bay regulations also establish appropriate criteria for development in resource areas.
- The Old Town Fairfax “Overlay” zoning district ensures that future development is sensitive to the distinctive character of the area.
- Tree preservation regulations protect trees throughout the development process and (on large lots) after construction is complete.

## Future Efforts

The appearance of the City in future years will largely be determined by the decisions currently being made. Public expenditures, development regulations, development proposals and civic pride on the part of residential and business communities will all influence the future appearance of the City.

The remaining large-lot estates that tie the City to its rural past as well as the remaining buildings, such as the Farr Homeplace, the Ted Britt residence and the Mavis Cobb house serve to remind residents and visitors of the City’s historic roots. These residences and the land upon which they stand serve to enhance the community’s appearance through preservation of the houses, mature trees and open spaces. These estates should be top priorities for preservation.

The City has been a member of Tree City USA for over 20 years. Recent park developments have included substantial tree planting. While the City has consistently included new street trees in projects and worked to maintain existing tree cover throughout the City, damage does occur due to natural events such as storms and normal aging as well as impacts from human settlement. Growth patterns have been impacted by activities such as pruning to accommodate utility lines, passing of large buses and trucks and constrained root beds. The City should continue to work with Dominion Virginia Power to minimize the impact of regular tree trimming activities on the City’s street trees.



# Community Appearance— Goal, Objectives & Strategies

*Goal: Establish and maintain an attractive, distinctive image for the City based on well-maintained buildings, green spaces and plantings.*

*Objective CA-1 Improve the appearance of the major commercial corridors.*

## **Strategies**

**CA-1.1 Evaluate the Zoning regulations to ensure that future development reflects scale and character appropriate to the City.**

The City's Zoning regulations currently permit a wide variety of development forms inside a broad envelope. These regulations should be reviewed and amended if necessary to ensure that the appropriate scale and character is reflected in their design. This effort should be undertaken following refinement of the Community Appearance Plan to reflect the City's design expectations.

**CA-1.2 Establish and implement land use strategies to redevelop unsightly commercial areas and to encourage concentrated and unified future development.**

Portions of the City's commercial corridors are composed of deteriorating and obsolete development characteristic of the commercial "strip." Therefore, the City should continue to use tools such as overlay and incentive zoning, capital improvement programming, the rezoning and special permit review process, and encouragement of private initiatives to improve the appearance and upgrade the quality of development in those corridors. In addition, the City should pursue the enactment of regulations requiring affirmative maintenance of blighted property.

**CA-1.3 Implement design guidelines for major commercial areas.**

The Community Appearance Plan, which outlines design guidelines for Old Town Fairfax and the Fairfax Boulevard and Main Street corridors, should be consistently and vigorously implemented. These guidelines establish the appropriate treatment and detailing of facades, the use of materials and color

schemes, massing and scale of buildings, appropriate signage, and parking lot design, circulation and landscaping. The guidelines represent official City policy to guide the various boards and commissions in reviewing public and private development proposals. Special treatment should be applied at "crossroad intersections" in the City (e.g. Northfax, Kamp Washington, Fairfax Circle, Main Street (at Pickett Road)) to reinforce the landmark status of those areas.

**CA-1.4 Reduce the visual dominance of the automobile by emphasizing pedestrian accessibility and significant landscaping.**

The major commercial corridors cater to the automobile through the use of prominent signage and abundant, free parking. Asphalt and automobiles dominate that landscape. To provide visual relief and soften the appearance of those corridors, extensive landscape planting should be provided along medians, street edges and parking lots. Plantings also help to reduce climatic extremes and pollutants, physically separates sidewalks from streets and, to a lesser extent, provides a buffer from traffic noise, thereby making the environment more hospitable to people.

In addition, the provision of safe and attractive sidewalks and trails providing access to businesses along those corridors will further reduce the dominance of the automobile and increase pedestrian usage. All corridors should be functional and pleasant to use on foot or by bicycle. Each area of the City should foster mobility for residents and visitors, including pedestrians, with safety as the highest priority. Also, it is essential that appropriate crosswalks and pedestrian-scaled lighting be included as elements of any future pedestrian system.

**CA-1.5 Provide superior maintenance of public rights-of-way and open space areas.**

Efforts to enhance the appearance of the major commercial corridors through landscaping, signage and

roadway improvements constitute a substantial first step. Such improvements will not have a positive impact, however, if allowed to deteriorate or become unkempt. Personnel, equipment and materials (through public forces or private contractors) must be provided to assure that improvements are properly maintained so that they enhance rather than detract from the appearance of the major commercial corridors.

#### **CA-1.6 Bring nonconforming signs into compliance with current regulations.**

Although signs serve a useful purpose, they can quickly overpower and dominate an area if not controlled. In an effort to provide for signage that is adequate but not excessive, the City has amended its sign regulations on four occasions since 1987. However, because nonconforming signs are protected as “grandfathered,” there is little incentive for sign owners to replace or upgrade nonconforming signs. Consequently, amortization and incentive programs are needed to achieve greater compliance.

Amortization provides for the termination of nonconforming signs after a specified period of time. Although it is authorized in some states, the Commonwealth of Virginia does not allow local jurisdictions to require the amortization of signs. The City should consider assisting other Virginia localities in pursuing enabling legislation to permit the amortization of nonconforming signs. A significant improvement in the appearance and safety of the City’s commercial corridors would result from such an effort.

In addition to this legislative effort, the City should develop voluntary incentive programs to encourage the improvement of privately owned signs. Design assistance and financial participation by the City are examples of incentive programs that can be used to stimulate compliance with current sign regulations.

Provisions for special exceptions are included in the City’s sign regulations. The City should evaluate each request for an exception from the sign regulations from a critical perspective, with an eye toward reducing visual clutter and improving the appearance of the City. Special exceptions should only be granted for unusual circumstances, and emerging patterns of granted exception requests should be monitored to aid in determining whether amendments to the sign regulations are indicated.

#### **CA-1.7 Implement and facilitate improved lighting standards for outdoor areas.**

Existing development regulations and the Community Appearance Plan address outdoor lighting height, sources, intensity, placement and style. These outdoor lighting standards result in protection from glare and visual distraction, and enhance the appearance of City roadways and businesses. The City should consider lighting improvements as part of the Capital Improvement Program and encourage all developers to provide quality lighting within developments and along City collector and arterial streets consistent with the CAP. For instance, existing conventional cobra head street lights should be retrofitted to reduce glare and light spillage off of the right of way area and therefore reduce light pollution.

#### **CA-1.8 Eliminate distracting elements and visual clutter from the City’s roadways.**

Telephone and power poles, overhead wires, transformer boxes and signage clutter all blemish the City’s landscape. As part of a long-range effort, the City should continue its program of placing utility lines and structures underground. In addition, the City’s development regulations should ensure that utilities are placed underground in new developments. Further, the City should actively explore funding options and seek alternative approaches to accomplish the placement of utilities underground throughout the City. This ongoing effort will dramatically improve the appearance of the commercial corridors. In conjunction with this program, mast arm traffic signals should be installed to significantly reduce the visual clutter at major intersections, and public and private signs should be consolidated or eliminated where possible. A plan for directional signs in the commercial corridors should be developed and implemented, such as has been partially implemented in Old Town Fairfax. As a more immediate measure, the City should reduce the number of public signs by eliminating unnecessary ones.

A citywide plan should be prepared to control the location and design of the randomly scattered and uncoordinated mix of paper distribution boxes. The plan should designate specific locations, a standard design for the boxes, and direct their use to the specified locations and design.



### **CA-1.9 Establish a comprehensive planting and landscaping plan for parks, public schools, public sites and rights of way.**

A coordinated urban forestry plan should be developed which details a regular maintenance and continuous planting program of native species plant materials. The City should consider setting aside funds collected as user fees from City facilities (including schools) for landscaping efforts on public properties.

Roadside and median landscape planting should be carefully designed to assure that these areas remain attractive year-round. Deciduous street trees should periodically be accented with evergreen trees and seasonal shrubbery and flowering plants to provide attractive vistas with minimal maintenance requirements.

### *Objective CA-2 Enhance the appearance of the City's mature neighborhoods.*

#### **Strategies**

#### **CA-2.1 Implement the housing objectives and strategies concerning the preservation of the existing housing stock.**

Objectives and strategies contained in the Housing section stress the use of available housing programs for maintaining and upgrading housing units in mature neighborhoods. The Housing section also points to the development of new guidelines to ensure the redevelopment of neighborhoods is done in a manner that protects the City's character. The successful implementation of those policies will result in the improved appearance of not just individual units, but also entire neighborhoods.

#### **CA-2.2 Target public capital improvements to neighborhoods identified for rehabilitation assistance.**

The concentration of resources in specific identified neighborhoods to be determined will instill confidence in affected homeowners and encourage participation in available assistance programs. Scattering available capital improvement funds among various neighborhoods, while appearing to be equitable, does not create the concentration of funds necessary to create a catalyst to "turn a neighborhood around."

#### **CA-2.3 Adopt a residential component to the Community Appearance Plan.**

A draft Residential component of the Community Appearance Plan establishes guidelines to complement zoning, building and health code requirements to make City neighborhoods more attractive, livable

and viable. The draft has been reviewed by the Council of Civic Associations, which recommended its adoption to the City Council to encourage community appearance initiatives in City neighborhoods. In addition, strategy HOU-2.5 of this plan recommends the preparation of individual plans describing guidelines for development in each of the City's residential neighborhoods.

### *Objective CA-3 Encourage exemplary site and building design, construction and maintenance.*

#### **Strategies**

#### **CA-3.1 Adopt standards for new forms of residential development to ensure appropriate design and compatibility with the City's character.**

Contemporary forms of residential development, including zero lot line, cluster and small-lot residential infill, present design problems requiring specialized solutions. The provision of adequate landscaped parking, retention of open space and provision of privacy for individual residential units are problems that are especially pertinent to these types of development. Standards should be developed and adopted which address these and similar problems to ensure that alternatives to the conventional subdivision become and remain viable in the City.

#### **CA-3.2 Incorporate design elements in public improvement projects that will set a positive example for the private sector.**

Quality design in public improvement projects attracts superior private development. The City should exhibit the same quality of design and construction that it expects from private developers. Also, the City should encourage a similar philosophy in Fairfax County, State and Federal construction projects which are to be located in the City. The City Council has committed to establishing LEED Silver as the goal for all public facilities. Similarly, the City should also incorporate sustainable features in public improvement projects whenever possible.

#### **CA-3.3 Encourage the incorporation of public art in both public and private sector development.**

Art promotes better understanding of communities, reflects identity and origin and enriches lives. The City should encourage art in public areas including allocating City funds for art, encouraging public art through development requirements and hosting public art competitions. See also CR-2.1.

**CA-3.4 Promote a public-private partnership for the enhancement of community appearance.**

Working through existing City and community groups such as the Community Appearance Committee, civic associations and the Chamber of Commerce, ongoing public-private cooperation should be fostered. Using the Community Appearance Plan as a guide, efforts such as the City's residential and commercial award programs should be continued and enhanced. In addition to the aesthetic amenities offered by developers through the proffer system, aesthetic improvements should be sought from existing businesses and high-density residential communities. These improvements could be encouraged through offering public services such as technical expertise or planting assistance as an incentive. Annual "clean-up/fix-up" weeks, sponsored jointly by the City and private organizations, stimulate ongoing interest in improving and maintaining properties.

**CA-3.5 Promote "Complete Streets" and "green" development in public and private projects throughout the City.**

The unique feel and appearance of the City is vital to its success. By incorporating design standards that encourage non-motorized vehicle use and are environmentally friendly, the City can build upon its character and create an environment that will entice people to spend more time in the City rather than driving through. For example, Complete Streets is a program which promotes roads be designed and operated to create a safe environment for residents and visitors to cross the street, walk to shops, and bicycle to work. It encourages connectivity of all modes of transportation. Creating an atmosphere that supports walking and bicycling can also improve economic conditions for both business owners and residents.

Incorporating landscaping elements such as street trees, planters, bioswales and rain gardens not only improve the aesthetics of the City but also help curb stormwater runoff issues. Street trees provide shade, reduce the heat island effect and offset carbon dioxide. Protection of green spaces and open areas also offers the double benefit of protecting viewsheds and natural stormwater management.

*Objective CA-4 Facilitate the transformation of the Old Town area into an attractive, inviting pedestrian-oriented environment.*

**Strategies****CA-4.1 Improve the aesthetics and pedestrian amenities in Old Town Fairfax.**

With unique turn-of-the-century architectural features, brick sidewalks and street trees already in place, this area serves as a focal point for the City's business and cultural activities. To enhance this area, the recommendations contained in the City's Community Appearance Plan should be implemented. These include providing decorative lighting, developing mini parks, providing additional plantings and plazas and improving pedestrian walkways. In addition, the provision of brick crosswalks and additional pedestrian signals will encourage the use of existing and planned parking facilities in Old Town Fairfax.

**CA-4.2 Maintain and enhance the City's publicly owned historic buildings and grounds.**

City buildings and property should set the standard for excellence in both design and maintenance. The City should foster a program of regular maintenance, periodically monitor the condition of its properties and provide enhancements where necessary.

**CA-4.3 Maintain the existing "small town" scale and character in future development.**

New development in the Old Town area should be compatible with older, historic development so that the existing character is not eroded or transformed. To ensure compatibility, new development should complement the existing architecture in terms of scale, setback, use of materials and detailing. All new development and redevelopment should be consistent with the CAP (including the Old Town Fairfax Historic and Transition District Guidelines).